The revolution that never took place: episodic framing of political repression and unrest in Egypt

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to assess the role of both the mass media and the social media in supporting the protesters in Tahrir Square in spring 2011, and to challenge the claim that the new social media created an alternative public sphere (Castells 1997) that empowered the Egyptian protesters by portraying them in a positive light, thereby precipitating 'the end of a 30-year autocratic regime' (Harlow and Johnson 2011).The distinction between episodic frames and thematic frames is crucial in this investigation: episodic frames being defined as those that depict public issues 'in terms of concrete instances' and thematic frames as those that place 'public issues in some more general or abstract context' and that present these issues in terms of 'general outcomes and conditions' (Iyengar 1991: 14). This episodic-thematic distinction suggests that episodic coverage of the Tahrir protests provided limited insight into the limited success of these protests, and that thematic interpretations did not provide sufficient insight into the endemic nature of repression in Egyptian society.

Contributor Note

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News of unrest and protests flared up across the Middle East and North Africa in spring 2011, one of the principal causes being the indifference of corrupt regimes and the police brutality that perpetuated such regimes. Its roots can be traced to the Tunisian grocer who set himself on fire on December 17, 2010 because the police confiscated his fruit cart and the authorities ignored his sad plight; thousands took to the streets to protest against police brutality and corruption in Tunisia and to 'demand better living conditions' (UCDP 2011). Tens of thousands more amassed in Tahrir Square in Cairo on January 25th, 2011 to protest against the murder of the blogger, Khaled Said also at the hands of the police. On February 11th, 21 days of protests, bloody clashes and small periodic concessions culminated in the toppling of President Mubarak of Egypt. Crowds gathered on February 14th in Pearl Roundabout in the capital of Bahrain in a reenactment of Tahrir Square; but the reaction of Colonel Gaddafi, three days later in Libya set the violent pattern of counter-revolution that has persisted since then: 'mercenaries and even armed prisoners were deployed with orders to clear the streets of demonstrators'. The Syrian army continues to use 'scorched earth tactics' against opponents of the regime.

Arab spring journalism is characterized by its strong sense of commitment to such protests, the danger and suspense as protesters square up to murderous recalcitrant regimes, the sudden relief as dictators are at last toppled. This journalism stoked the burning embers of social injustice, broadcasting inflamm-atory material such as the video 'of the Egyptian who set fire to himself in reaction to the injustice he has faced' (Khaled Said 17-1-2011). Mass media and social media collaborated and converged in their representation and support: creating a 'participatory media ecosystem' (Hermida 2010) based on 'interplay between digital technologies and journalistic practice' (Leuven 2013). The Khaled Said Facebook group congratulated the Tunisian protesters and ignited local support, declaring: 'I can see the dawn of freedom in Egypt coming' (Khaled Said 15-1-2011).

NBC typified ecstatic media reactions to the 'toppling' of the President of Egypt, broadcasting 'the sound of Freedom' and announcing that 'the people have risen up and toppled a police state,' and that 'the people of Egypt freed themselves with the help of the army' (NBC 12-2-2011).

But this image of a toppled dictatorship is misguided. *During* the protests, Egypt's army participated in torture and killings (*Guardian* 10-4-2013) and the Egyptian regime has continued to decimate dissent. On October 9th, 2011 the military massacred Coptic Christian protesters outside the State television headquarters. Participants testify that 'at least two armored personnel vehicles (APCs) drove recklessly through crowds of demonstrators', crushing and killing at least 10 protesters (Human rights watch 25-10-2011). In June, the army 'conducted virginity tests on' – i.e. *raped* – an indeterminate number of women demonstrators, shamed into silence (AI 31-5-2011). In December 2011, soldiers stripped one veiled woman protester and 'stomped' on her unconscious body (rt.com 18-12-2011).

Military courts sentenced more than 12,000 civilians to prison between spring 2011 and summer 2013 (Middle East online 7-7-2013). In July 2013, the army massacred hundreds of unarmed Muslim Brotherhood supporters. The military ousted President Morsi in the summer of

2013, accusing his supporters of terrorism. In April 2014, their chief – the current Egyptian President, General el-Sisi – appropriated 93.3 percent of the votes cast in the presidential election. In June 2014, an Egyptian court confirmed death sentences against the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and 182 supporters in a mass trial (Al Jazeera 21-6-2014). Three correspondents of Al Jazeera were accused of conspiring with this same 'terrorist group' and have since received seven-year prison sentences (Al Jazeera 22-6-2014).

This is only the public face of coercion in Egypt. The deadliest instruments of state repression operate behind closed doors. *Official* state detention orders guarantee seven days of sexual abuse and torture with clubs, ropes and electrodes (Middle East Watch 1992: 35).

These reports suggests that a revolution – 'both in 'the institutions of a government' and in 'the principles on which they are based' (Goldstone 1992) – did not take place in Egypt, that repression is endemic, and that 'the structures of power remain intact' (Phillips 2012): not just in institutions such as the government, the police, the army or the legal system that seem to act 'in the name of the nation or of the state' but in 'institutions of knowledge, of foresight and care such as universities, schools, hospitals' and in traditional institutions such as the family through which this system of repression is communicated, justified, implemented and perpetuated (Chomsky and Foucault 1971).

Researchers such as Abu-Magd (2012) provide insight into the roots of this endemic repression. She characterizes Egypt as a 'Republic of Retired Generals' in which the terrifying threat of internal armed conflict has been smothered through the early retirement of volatile army officers. These retired army officers act as government ministers, governors and mayors, as heads of banks, businesses, universities, schools, and hospitals – promoting military cultures, hierarchies and interests – and engineering the 'public-private symbiosis' between public institutions and monopolistic private businesses (Waterbury 1993) that both defines and explains the obscene levels of corruption and poverty in contemporary Egypt.

Current news reports also suggest that the Egyptian army promotes, reflects and reinforces broader and deeper identities, prejudices and material interests that are operationalized through the persecution, repression, massacre, robbery and rape of the Other: 'local residents' participated in the killing of Coptic Christians at Maspero (Human rights watch 25-10-2011) and local human rights movements continually denounce the 'social acceptability' of sexual harassment (HarassMap 2014).

The purpose of this paper is to understand and compare mass media and new social media coverage of the Tahrir Square protests, providing fresh insights into the nature and implications of their coverage of political processes, and supplementing current mass and social media research by evaluating their role in supporting the protesters in Tahrir Square.

This research suggests that media coverage of the Tahrir Square protests tended to support the protesters by broadcasting the social injustice that precipitated the protests, by creating a strong sense of being there, by constructing a gripping narrative of danger and suspense, by rallying the support required to topple a dictator, by helping 'the Egyptian people' to restore

their dignity in the international limelight, and by keeping a historical record of this courageous struggle in the streets of Cairo. But such coverage simultaneously undermined and deluded both protesters and supporters, by polarizing Egyptian society into 'the regime' and 'the Egyptian people', by blurring the distinction between personal dignity and national pride, but most of all by implying that toppling a dictator is tantamount to dissolving a repressive regime.

The distinction between episodic frames and thematic frames is crucial in this investigation: episodic frames being defined as those that depict public issues 'in terms of concrete instances' and thematic frames as those that place 'public issues in some more general or abstract context' and that present these issues in terms of 'general outcomes and conditions' (Iyengar 1991: 14). This episodic-thematic distinction suggests that episodic coverage of the Tahrir protests provided limited insight into the nature and success of these protests, and that thematic interpretations did not provide sufficient insight into the repressive nature of Egyptian institutions.

This analysis balances two perspectives on the Tahrir protests. One perspective is based on a detailed content and frame analysis of 10 days of news coverage of The Square, providing insights into their interpretations of repression and resistance in Egypt at the time of the so-called revolution (spring 2011). The second perspective is based on reports that suggest that the limitations of political perception embedded in episodic coverage of the protests precipitated the social construction of a revolution that never took place, thereby reflecting and reinforcing the limits of substantial political reform in Egypt.

Current social media research

Castells (1997) claimed that the Internet has created 'a counter public sphere for voicing alternative views, building solidarity and encouraging empower-ment'. Social media researchers have similarly claimed that new technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones and social media such as Facebook and Twitter played a key role in organizing, mobilizing and supporting popular protests against undemocratic regimes in the Middle East. Harlow and Johnson (2011) argued that the social media empowered the Egyptian protesters by portraying them in a positive light, hence precipitating 'the end of a 30-year autocratic regime'.

Leuven (2013) has associated the Internet with increased use of on-the-ground sources and 'a richer tapestry of news'. Lotten (2011) on the other hand argues that professional journalists continue to dominate the sphere of Twitter because their reports resonate with large domestic audiences.

Aouragh and Alexander (2011) conclude that 'the Internet is both a product of imperialist and capitalist logics and something that is simultaneously used by millions in the struggle to resist these logics,' that these technologies are being used as instruments of protest in spite of – rather than because of – the intent of their creators, and that street protest predates such technologies.

This article proposes to contribute to current research by assessing the ways in which social media such as the Khaled Said Facebook page both supported big business and the status quo by extolling new communication technologies and at the same time undermined the old dictatorial regime of President Hosni Mubarak by supporting

the protesters.

Episodic vs. thematic frames

This article examines the media framing of the Tahrir Square protests, arguing that news frames play a crucial role in political perception and are therefore very useful in understanding the ways in which mass media and social media enabled and limited insights into the Arab spring.

Goffman (1974: 10) used the example of a bus queue to illustrate the claim that frames 'enable' perception and interpretation. The bus queue frame directs attention to the bus stop sign but deflects attention from the clothes, physical appearance and language of prospective passengers. Goffman concluded that people use frames to 'locate, perceive, identify and label' sensory information (p. 21).

Researchers such as Gitlin (1980), Neuman et al. (1992) and Snow and Benford (1992) agree that frames enable the understanding and communication of experience. Neuman referred to frames as 'conceptual tools' that people use to 'convey, interpret and evaluate information' (Neuman et al. 1992: 62). Gitlin (1980: 6) described frames as 'principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters'.

Other researchers claim that frames 'limit' our understanding. Entman states that the frame in a news text is 'the imprint of power' that identifies 'the actors or interests that competed to dominate the text' (1993: 55), and that powerful interests promote 'a particular problem definition, causal interpretation,

moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation' (53).

Iyengar's distinction between episodic and thematic frames (1991) is crucial in this paper: episodic frames being defined as those that depict public issues 'in terms of concrete instances' and thematic frames as those that place 'public issues in some more general or abstract context' (Iyengar 1991: 14). Iyengar concluded that episodic coverage of political problems treats events as disconnected, burying the underlying roots and continuity of social problems, and distracting 'attention from societal and governmental responsibility' (174).

In contrast this article claims that episodic coverage of the Tahrir Square protests masked the underlying nature and continuity of political repression in Egypt – not because it blamed individuals rather than the government (Iyengar 1991) – but because it focused on Presidential and governmental responsibility rather than societal responsibility: therefore under-reporting the prevalence of political repression in Egyptian society.

Collective action frames

It could be argued that this pursuit of two types of news frames – episodic and thematic – does not do justice to the unfolding, dynamic nature of Arab spring journalism. This paper will therefore add one more type of frame – the collective action frame – to this investigation, suggesting that this frame provides additional insight into the intensity of Tahrir Square coverage, the heightening sense of danger, suspense and urgency as the narrative unfolds, the desperate

cries for help and insistent calls to action that resonate through the social media.

Gamson (1992) argues that the collective action frame appeals to an inherent sense of injustice, agency, and identity. Injustice is based on the attribution of responsibility to a particular person or entity. Agency and identity is based on the polarization of 'us' and them': because collective action requires a consciousness 'of human agents whose policies or practices must be changed' and of a 'we' who 'will help to bring the change about' (8).

This article examines the collective action frames in the Khaled Said Facebook page in order to understand their effectiveness in stirring up the intense sense of outrage, agency and identity that characterizes Tahrir Square journalism and in drawing in support to the cause.

Framing as a process

D'Angelo (2002: 873) argues that framing research should reflect four central empirical aims:

1. To analyze the conditions that produce frames

2. To identify frames

3. To investigate the interaction between frames and 'the individual's mind'

4. To analyze the influence of frames on public opinion.

This article attempts to incorporate all of these aims, suggesting that framing is a dynamic process that involves communicator, text, receiver and culture (Entman 1993). The text alone does not determine the meaning because the meaning is not part of some 'one-sided process, which governs how all events will be signified' (Hall 2011) but instead interacts with political attitudes (Iyengar 1991) and memories (Pan and Kosicki 1993).

Content analysis

Content analysis has been used to provide insights into the framing of the Tahrir Square protests in spring 2011. Five major foreign news outlets and one major Facebook group have been analyzed. NBC Nightly News is the most watched night news program in the US and had around 8.6 million viewers in spring 2011 (*New York Post* 29-6-2011). Al Jazeera reaches 220 million households in 100 countries and has eight million online users per month. BBC television has 239 million viewers per week; BBC online has 20 million users.

The *Sun* newspaper is the most popular UK tabloid – has 17.8 million print and on-line readers (www.guardian.co.uk/datablog/2012) – and is part of the global media conglomerate, News corp. RTVE is the main public television and radio organization in Spain (Medina and Ojer 2010). The Khaled Said Facebook Group set the date of the protests: nearly 30,000 Egyptian bloggers agreed online to protest offline on January 25th (Khaled Said 2014).

This research is based on five samples of media production and reception. Sample 1 includes all the currently accessible Internet news items of five major foreign news outlets that referred to these iconic events:

- The 'Day of Revolt' (25-1-2011)
- The 'Friday of Rage' that marked

the burning of the headquarters of the ruling party and the President's first speech (28-1-2011)
- The second speech (1-2-2011)
- The 'Battle of the Camel' in which supporters of the old regime and protesters clashed (2-2-2011)
- The third speech (10-2-2011)
- The 'Friday of Departure' that signaled the toppling of the President (11-2-2011)
- The 'Clean-up Day' on which the revolutionaries 'cleaned up after themselves' (13-2-2011).

Sample 2 consists of all the episodic Tahrir news reports (totalling 19 reports) on the 26th and 29th of January and on the 3rd and 12th of February 2011 that did not refer to these 'iconic events'. The purpose of Sample 2 is to defend this research against the charge of artefact of method, suggesting that both mass media and social media outlets produced little in-depth structural analysis of political repression and resistance throughout the protests.

Sample 3 includes all the thematic news reports in that period. Sample 4 consists of 11 days of Khaled Said Facebook reports site in order to measure its contribution to our understanding of these political processes. Sample 5 constitutes 40 responses to a short Al Jazeera YouTube clip on the toppling of President Mubarak (Al Jazeera 12-2-2011) that provides valuable insights into the ephemeral nature of framing effects and audience reception.

The unit of analysis in this research is the news report; all the news reports on the designated dates were downloaded from the designated news outlets and transcribed according to instructions in a coding manual. Two separate coders were used to interpret each sample of

news reports in order to compare results and measure reliability. The results of keyword extraction software were compared to the results of human coders in order to detect differences between interpretations of texts on the part of the coders and the specific language that appeared in the text. Little difference emerged.

Influences *on* the Tahrir Square news frame

The coverage of the spring 2011 protests in Egypt seemed to serve two purposes: to promote the interests of foreign governments and news organizations and to capture the interests of foreign audiences.

The first purpose is to promote government interests. Burns (5-7-2013) argues that the US relies on Egypt to contribute to security in Israel and the Middle East by combating 'radical terrorist groups' and by staying 'true to … democratic ideals'.

Episodic framing of the protests in Tahrir Square – in which 'the Egyptian people' supposedly 'freed themselves with the help of the army' (NBC 12-2-2011) – supports this cruel paradox of US policy and ideology: military stability based on supposedly 'democratic ideals'.

The second purpose of this frame is to promote the interests of news organizations and advertisers by capturing audiences. NBC Nightly News added 876,000 viewers in the first quarter of 2011 to top the night news ratings in the US at 8.6 million. It attributed this great success to 'major news reports' that included the nuclear disaster in Japan and the revolution in

Tahrir Square (*New York Post* 29-6-2011).

Powerful political and economic interests similarly influenced the Khaled Said site that expressed its gratitude to its 'sponsors' and reminded bloggers 'that Google & Twitter & Facebook have been really good supportive companies in our movement since Khaled Said's death' (Khaled Said 1-2-2011). The site advertised the latest communication technologies such as Tweet2speak, reflecting the career interests of the site manager: Wael Ghonim, the Head of Marketing for Google Middle East and North Africa and the author of the 2.25 million-dollar bestseller, *Revolution: 2.0* (*New York Times* 22-1-2012).

Social and mass media organizations collaborated in this state-of-the-art communications project. The 25th January protests began with 'Live Interview at 3:40 Cairo time' in which the Khaled Said spokesperson spoke on 'US live national morning radio show': in a 'co-production of New York Times and BBC' (Khaled Said 25-1-2011).

Construction and composition of the Tahrir Square news frame

Tahrir Square – 'the heartbeat of the revolution' (NBC 13-2-2011) – became the focal point both of the protests and of the coverage of the protests: because of its name (Liberation Square) and its role in the liberation of Egypt from British rule, because the gathering of up to a million people in the Square – united in their determination to depose the President – captured the hearts and minds of global audiences, and because it is the site of the Ruling Party headquarters that blazed to great cinematic effect on 28 January 2011.

Content analysis of 19 episodic news reports on 26/29-1-2011 and 3/12-1-2011 in Sample 2 produced a similar picture of the protests to the 36 'iconic' reports in Sample 1, thus undermining charges of artifact of method. Both samples presented a small cast of actors in the Tahrir Square script: the President, government and police on one side and the protesters and 'the Egyptian people' on the other.

The main goals were to depose the President and the government and to increase 'freedom and democracy' in Egypt. The regime tended to use two methods to disperse the protesters: coercion operationalized through 'supporters of the old regime' and consent transmitted through televised presidential speeches. The protesters stood their ground, using chants, posters and their presence in large numbers to express their opposition.

News organizations portrayed the army as neutral, observing that, 'the soldiers are still very much admired, very much respected … very much revered' (Al Jazeera 28-1-2011). This view clashes discordantly with the subsequent charge that during the protests, Egypt's army participated in torture and killings, disappearing hundreds of protesters whose mutilated bodies were buried in unmarked graves (*Guardian* 10-4-2013)

In order to operationalize this simple episodic frame of the corrupt regime on one side and the legitimate unified demands of the Egyptian people on the other, the range of sources is extremely limited: official statements on the part of the regime, President Obama's disagreement, brief statements, chants and banners on the part of the protesters. Foreign experts interpreted the events: only Al Jazeera consulted a local political activist.

Both NBC and Al Jazeera specialized in breathless pleas from beleaguered protesters: 'I want another President for Egypt' (NBC 28-1-2011) or 'we've had enough!' (Al Jazeera 25-1-2011).

This episodic framing of these 18 days of protests in Tahrir Square 2011 thus culminated in the illusion of revolution. NBC announced that 'the Egyptian people are free' (12-2-2011). RTVE concluded that 'the 25th of January should be renamed the day of the people, of the revolution and of the beginning of a new republic' (12-2-2011).

But the catalogue of repressive acts that post-dated the protests – the army massacres, rapes, persecutions, mass death sentences – suggest 'the Egyptian people' are not quite as 'free' as NBC has proclaimed.

The main strength of this episodic framing of the Tahrir protests is that it propelled Egyptian protesters into the public sphere (Habermas 1989), giving voice to their deep grievances against the Egyptian government, spreading a hunger for social justice around Egypt and around the world, permitting protesters to collaborate in the revolutionary re-construction of national identity: a giant screen having been erected for that very purpose on the edge of Tahrir Square, projecting real-time coverage of the protests on the Al Jazeera channel.

Here on this TV screen protesters could enjoy live coverage of their epic street-battles against supporters of the old regime, listen to Presidential speeches urging them to leave the Square, and see reflections of their own courage and self-sacrifice on the silver screen.

The Square itself became a gallery or shrine to their exploits and their grief: framed photographs of the martyrs propped up around a lone tree.

The untapped talents of the modern young protesters were pitted against the corrupt outmoded practices of the old regime. The Battle of the Camel (2-2-2011) epitomized this struggle between traditional culture (camels and whips) and modern identities (cars and mobiles). Computer-literate protesters set up a Twitter site (@HosniMubarak) to mock the outdated technologies of the regime (Translating revolution 21-5-2011). Banners included computer-savvy geeky messages such as 'Delete Mubarak'.

This preoccupation with the construction of a proud modernist national image seeped into the Al Jazeera coverage of the departure of the President.

> This is what they were waiting for. Hosni Mubarak has gone … this whole idea of Egyptians worshipping their Pharaoh, no-one can ever, ever say this again … I am so proud. (Al Jazeera 12-2-2011)

But Freedom had its limits. Foreign journalists acted as gate-keepers to global audiences: much was left unsaid because the main goal of their episodic frame seemed to be to capture the minds and hearts of audiences with a simple tale of Good (in the form of the Youth of Egypt) and Evil (in the form of the Old Regime). Dissent was largely silenced.

'Toppling the tyrant – Egyptian-style' (Phillips 2012) highlights this omission, permitting a young mother to voice her doubts, suggesting that 'the structures of power remain intact':

> 'I did not go to the Square because there were thugs there. I did not

think about the protests because … I had no money and no food. Besides we did not expect the protests to change anything; we expected the protests to get worse. On the third day of the protests I had no money for my baby's milk. I cried all day.'

Thematic frames

Content analysis of six thematic BBC news reports and seven thematic RTVE reports (Sample 3) produced a similar polarized picture of the protests: oppressed people vs. oppressive regime. President Obama stressed that 'it was up to the Egyptian people to choose their leaders' and praised military 'professionalism and patriotism' (BBC 2-2-2011).

The BBC insisted that 'it took just 18 days to overthrow a proud, elderly man who had pitted himself stubbornly against the will of millions of Egyptians' and claimed that this system turned out to be 'brittle and fragile' (12-2-2011).

RTVE on the other hand analyzed other actors, highlighting the 'opaque' nature of the army, the limited information on its economic interests and political agenda and the sinister omnipresence of torture in the repressive state apparatuses (28-1-2011).

Khaled Said

Social media sites such as the Khaled Said Facebook group (Sample 4) played an important role in organizing and inspiring the Arab spring protests and in disseminating up-to-the-moment on-the-ground news reports and democratic discourse. The pages are peppered with

high-impact human rights reports, constructing a consciousness of 'poverty, torture, corruption and injustice' that are 'all over Egypt' and of a government that 'is doing nothing to stop them' (Khaled Said 15-1-2011).

Collective action frames inspired moral indignation, agency and identity (Gamson 1992), based on the discourse that 'we Egyptians' can do something about it not merely by taking to the streets but also by 'using cameras as weapons' (Khaled Said 15-1-2011).

This appeal became stronger and more despairing as the threats increased: 'A massacre is about to take place in Egypt if the world doesn't interfere … Egyptians will be slaughtered in a few hours' (21-1-2011).

The spokesperson expresses a great deal of tolerance, describing himself as 'a simple Egyptian who wants Freedom & Justice to his people' and arguing that 'this is everyone's revolution & everyone should be included' but his political vision is myopic: 'Freedom of choosing leaders/representatives creates strong economies & encourages investments & increases workforce production' (Khaled Said 28-1-2011).

On the 28th January, an Egyptian army officer announces on this site that 'We Egyptian Army and People are lovers,' suggesting once again that episodic coverage of these protests has lost its way.

Influences *of* the Tahrir Square news frame

This investigation of 40 responses to a short Al Jazeera YouTube clip (Sample 5) on the stepping-down of President Mubarak (Al Jazeera 12-2-2011) provided

valuable insights into the ephemeral nature of framing effects and audience reception. The responses could be categorized as emotional responses and observations, congratulations to 'the people of Egypt', religious, political and nationalistic interpretations of the protests, and heated debates that members of the audience themselves generate.

Three of the responses blindly echo the official statements of world leaders: 'Once more the Egyptians show the world how civilization is supposed to be done.' Three celebrate the sense of 'Freedom at last.' Blinkered nationalism plays an important role, its typical expressions being 'so proud of them' and 'long live the people of Egypt!'

The religious debate responds to the post, 'May Allah keep you and all other Muslims strong.' One user retorts, 'God had nothing to do with this. It was the sheer willpower of the Egyptian people to free themselves from this dictator.'

The political debate challenges the claim that 'Egyptians proved once again that as one united people, regardless of color or creed, one can pretty much accomplish anything.' One response challenges that optimistic assertion by recalling that the interim President is 'the CIA man in Cairo and Egypt's torturer-in-chief.'

This small sample of 40 YouTube responses suggests that audiences did frame the protests as a legitimate challenge to a stubborn, corrupt, violent, illegitimate President, government and regime as the other parts of this paper have indicated: but elements of dissent – the refusal to accept official interpretations – have also emerged.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that episodic news coverage of Tahrir Square supported the protesters by broadcasting the severe social injustice in Egypt, by constructing a gripping narrative of danger and suspense, by putting journalists in the midst of it all – thereby increasing our sense of being there and being involved – by rallying the support required to topple a dictator, by helping 'the Egyptian people' to regain their lost dignity. But on the other hand such coverage undermined political perception and reform, by polarizing Egyptian society into 'the regime' and 'the Egyptian people', by spotlighting the recovery of national pride – thereby exonerating the brutality of the national army – but most of all by implying that toppling a dictator is tantamount to dismantling a regime.

The main strength of this episodic coverage is that it propelled Egyptian protesters into the public sphere, providing powerful insights into current human rights abuses of the regime and pitting the untapped talents of courageous computer-savvy modern young protesters against the corrupt outmoded practices of the vicious old regime.

The collective action frames of the Khaled Said social media group played a crucial role in stirring up and channeling the sense of outrage and hunger for social justice that radicalized the region. But on the other hand the toppling of the Egyptian President served the political and economic interests both of mass media conglomerates and of social media sites, glorifying nationalism and military power, and attracting large advertisers and large audiences. Social media sites acted as 'both a product of imperialist and capitalist logics and [a tool] to resist these logics' (Aouragh and

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Alexander 2011): promoting big business, the status quo and new communication technologies *by* denouncing social injustice.

It could be argued that not all coverage of the protests is episodic – that RTVE in contrast to the *Sun*, BBC, NBC, Al Jazeera, Khaled Said – produced more thematic frames, issue-based reporting that analyzed other actors such as the Brotherhood, highlighted the 'opaque' and sinister nature of the army: the limited information on its economic interests, its political agenda, its use of torture and its disappearing of dissidents (28-1-2011). It could also be argued that Arab spring reporting reached a crescendo across the region, spilling over into other forms of journalism, and producing more thematic reports than this research suggests; or that Tahrir Square journalism merely reported the events as they happened, leaving members of the audience free to make up their minds as the small sample of 40 YouTube responses (Sample 5) and this very article suggest.

But this article concludes that the predominantly episodic coverage of the protests contributed to the social construction of a revolution that never took place and that both reflected and reinforced the limits of political perception and reform in Egypt.

Mass media and social media permitted the protesters in Tahrir Square to liberate themselves from the 'society of spectacle' (Debord, 1967): by re-inventing themselves as the technocratic heroes of 'Revolution 2.0' (Ghonim 2012).

But in the end the protests in Tahrir Square transformed themselves into a 'spectacle of refusal' rather than a 'refusal of spectacle' (Vaneigem 1963, cited in Chollet 2007): drowning themselves in the narcissistic image of themselves as revolutionaries rather than implementing substantial social reform in Egypt.

On February 12, 2011 the heroes of this revolution (that never was) staggered out the Square; soldiers ripped up their makeshift tents; thousands of them remained imprisoned. Meanwhile corruption and poverty marched on much as before in this, 'the Egyptian Republic of Retired Generals' (Abul-Magd 2012).

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